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She's Gone Now

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SHE'S GONE NOW

by

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Grandma died. It shouldn't have been a shock because Mom and Dad talked about it some and whispered about it even more when I wasn't supposed to hear: she was very sick and probably wouldn't live long. It didn't seem real, or possible.

The phone rang this morning. Mom cradled the receiver in her hands, covering one end, looking at Dad. "Your mother died," she said. He came over and picked up the receiver from her, looked down and cleared his throat. I left the kitchen where they were standing around the telephone.

At the living room window, I stared out aimlessly at the houses across the street. They blurred in my vision which clouded up as I looked out into the front yard. I knew the grass was brown and the air was crisp, but I didn't care. Or care to feel it. An occasional snowflake blew past the window. First snow, time for ice skating and sledding. I didn't care now.

Grandma's dead. I felt cold, as if the fingers of death beckoned me, tapping me on the shoulder to explain itself. It had never meant much before; death was a television word or a newspaper story idea. I heard Mom sobbing in the kitchen, behind my back. I knew Dad was wiping tears away; he blew his nose loudly into his handkerchief.

I went to my room and shut the door, carefully avoiding their eyes. I turned on the radio to a loud A.M. station and tried not to cry. Mom knocked softly at my door. She came in with her face all flushed and wet, clutching some tissues in her hand. I turned the radio off.

"Jenny, I suppose you heard the phone call about Grandma."

I nodded slightly and then turned my back to her. I lay on the bed, facing the lime green wall, staring at a particular scratch mark on it.

"You're almost sixteen now and could stay home alone,

but I'd rather you came with us to Virginia for the funeral. It would mean a lot . . . to your dad and me."

"Yeah, okay." I stared at that spot until I had every detail of it memorized. I heard the bedroom door close after Mom and the floor squeak outside in the hall as she returned to the kitchen.

Through the wall I heard muffled words and tears. I didn't let one tear fall. Instead, I stiffened myself and made myself cold.

In the car, I sat behind Mom and Dad, slouched down in the vinyl seat. The scenery outside the window was drab and empty. Occasional barns flashed by, old with rotting wood slats, faded tobacco advertisements painted on the sides. The sky was steel grey with heavy clouds that threatened snow or sleet.

"I wonder what they will do with her grocery store?" Mom looked over at Dad, trying to initiate some conversation.

"Probably close it up." Dad shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. He looked at me in the rear-view mirror and saw that I was listening.

"Thought you had some algebra and geography to study." Dad's eyes were red-rimmed and glassy.

"Can't study in a car," I retorted.

I tossed my school books onto the floor where I had discarded my sneakers. I wrapped up in a blanket and lay down in the stiff vinyl seat, staring up at the dome light.

I remembered a trip like this to Grandma's house quite a few years ago, when I was about seven or eight. I think it was our first visit to Grandma's. We pulled up in front of the large white house and parked our new Dodge on the grass over the curb. Grandma's store was attached to the front of the house and she had milk and bread advertisements in the windows. The squeaky screen door opened after the large, dowdy woman peered through the wire mesh at us. She recognized us and came ambling down the grey wooden steps with some difficulty, her heavy legs taking each step as a toddler would do it. Mom and Dad pushed me forward to kiss Grandma and

she bent her massive body forward, smiling and ready to kiss me on the cheek. Then I saw that Grandma had no teeth, and her wet, limp lips came near and kissed me as I stiffly waited through it.

We followed her up the steps into her grocery where she showed us all her counters and showcases. She yanked me by the elbow over to the candy counter and I stood on tip-toes to see into the glass-covered case.

"Eh? Eh?" She smiled with each question. Her eyes were squinted and buried in the recess made by her fat cheeks pushed up under her eyes. I saw her empty, pink gums. She looked over at Mom and Dad, and spoke some strange words to them, laughing. They nodded and laughed also. I looked over at my parents with a pleading expression, hoping they would intervene. They made motions for me to go ahead.

"No?" Grandma prompted.

I shook my head a little. I couldn't tell exactly what she wanted to know.

"Kekc? You want kek?" She pulled me over to the breads section. I didn't know what she wanted.

"What?" I hated to ask and look stupid. Mom and Dad were shifting around, looking uncomfortable.

"You want kek?" Grandma was getting irritated.

"Uh, no." It might be better to say no and not look greedy.

"Here." She picked up a Hostess Twinkie and slapped it into my hand with a sigh and no smile. She had meant "cake."

The car's wheels turned underneath me and their vibration on the asphalt was unnerving. Sitting up, I noticed that the fields had changed into hills and the turnpike had gouged its way through them, exposing jagged rocks. Mom and Dad made some pitiful conversation about Dad's job. Mom studied the map and read off the names of cities that we should pass sooner or later. She looked over her shoulder at me.

"Did you pack your good dress for the church service?"

"Uh-huh."

I read off the different license plates that passed us by.

Illinois, New York, Ohio. A car sped by with little faces laughing and waving at me. I shot them a look of disgust. Their dog barked at us, his noise concealed behind the glass of their car windows.

Grandma had a dog like that, red and brown, kind of blotchy. She called it Stosh; Polish for Stanley. Dad said Stosh didn't belong to Grandma, but it adopted her house as his homestead. He wandered around Grandma's kitchen after dinner and she grudgingly fed him table scraps. After that, she scooted Stosh out the back door, and he lurked in the streets with his dog-friends.

I had gotten some M&M Candies from Grandma's store and flipped them into the air, catching them in my mouth. Stosh was pushed out of the kitchen for the evening, so he watched my ridiculous attempts to catch the candy with my tongue. He gobbled up all my failures and licked his jowls with a long pink tongue that dangled, hoping I would goof again. Between the two of us, we finished off a large bag of the peanut kind. It was the Fourth of July, so I left Stosh and our tricks to go and see the fireworks.

That night after the celebration of the Fourth was over, Mom and Dad helped me up the stairs to bed at Grandma's house. I tripped up each step in a half-sleep. Grandma came yelling and stamping up the stairs at us in her half-English tongue, her arms waving wildly.

"Stosh, oh Stosh! Ohhhhhh . . . !"

Mom hurried me upstairs to bed while Dad calmed Grandma down. He understood her wails and the strange words that poured from her sagging lips. He put an arm around her thick shoulders and guided her into the kitchen.

Dad came up to check on me before turning in for the night. The door to the bedroom creaked open a few inches as he stuck his head in. The yellow hall light seeped in.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Jen," he whispered.

"What happened? Is Stosh okay?"

Dad came in the bedroom and left the door ajar. He wore a troubled expression and looked as if he was having a difficult time searching for some good words to use.

"No . . . no, he isn't okay. Grandma found him lying by her kitchen door tonight. He died, honey. He was just an alley dog, Jen. Don't worry about it, okay?"

Dad patted my hand and pulled the comforter closer around my neck. As he pulled the door shut behind him, he spoke to Mom.

"Grandma's real upset about that dog. Stosh was kind of an old friend to her. She kicked him around some, but she loved that old hound."

"Who would be cruel enough to poison a dog?" Mom wondered, not expecting an answer.

I lay in bed for hours with the horror of good old Stosh dying by the side of the house. I couldn't tell Mom that I knew who poisoned Stosh, that it was me, and that I didn't mean to! I was sick all night, suffering from the guilt that came from killing Grandma's best friend.

"Oh Grandma, I didn't kill him on purpose! He only ate a *little* candy. I wouldn't have let him eat any if I knew it would kill him. I'm so sorry, Grandma!"

She never heard the words; I couldn't bear to say them to that toothless old lady. My pillow was wet all night from silent prayers and apologies for Stosh. I hoped that God would make Grandma forget about Stosh and that he died.

The Dodge began to slow down as Dad pulled off the turnpike onto an exit ramp. "Gotta get some gas. Why don't you get yourselves some ice cream or something over there."

Mom and I looked over to where Dad pointed; it was a Howard Johnson's. The pukish turquoise and orange building stood against the grey and blue sky. People streamed into the building, running from their cars, bundled up in their own arms. The wind whipped the orange flags that dotted the landscape. I shuddered and pulled the blanket around me.

"How about it, honey. Want some ice cream?" Mom questioned eagerly over her shoulder.

"Nope."

They slammed the car doors behind them at the same time. Dad started to fill the gas tank, watching the digits flip up, one by one. Mom came around the back of the Dodge

and held onto her hair in the wind. Their words were marked with breaths of frosted air that were sucked up by the powerful wind. They squinted against the cold fury that battled them.

Mom's brow was pulled up in a knot, forming rows of horizontal wrinkles. Her hazel eyes searched Dad's face for answers to her questions. Dad studied the nozzle that was inserted into the gas tank, and shook his head slowly for a long time. He clicked the nozzle back into its hold on the gas pump. They looked at me through the foggy rear window.

Dad pulled his car door open before Mom had finished talking.

"She's just at that funny age, Walt." The words slipped in through the crack.

The Dodge started up with a whining noise as the motor tried to turn over in the wind-beaten parking lot. Dad shifted the car into drive and we jerked forward towards the turnpike, heading into the dark, bulbous clouds that touched the horizon.

On a cold, blustery day like that, Katie, Linda and I stayed indoors to play. Grandma's basement was a dark and forbidden dungeon. My cousins and I looked down the steep set of stairs, through the cobwebs, into the musty cellar. The wooden steps creaked under our feet and we giggled, holding onto each other for courage. The only light came from some half-windows located near the top of the earthen walls.

Mom had braided my hair into tight pigtails and tied red bows on each. My cousins held onto the ribbons like reins, and they pushed me ahead as the navigator of our adventure.

"C'mon Jenny, don't be afraid." Katie was older than my seven years; she was almost eleven.

"Look over there! It's Grandpa's fiddle!" Linda yanked on my other pigtail.

I squinted into the darkness as they pushed me in front of them, my hands outstretched for protection. They whispered and giggled over the treasures we found, and kept shoving me ahead to look for more. The dirt underneath our white patent shoes began to stick to the soles and made shuffling in the cellar difficult.

"Hey Jenny! Over there!" Katie pointed to Grandma's abandoned wood burning stove, massive and black with a charred grill on top.

"I hope Grandma doesn't find us. Are you sure it's okay for us to be down here?"

"Yeah, sure it is," Linda stood with hands on her hips. "Are you afraid or something, Jenny?"

"Na-na-na, Jenny is a chicken!" they chorused.

Katie opened the door to the oven and peered in, scrutinizing it as a potential adventure.

"You could fit two *elephants* in here! Let's get in and have a secret club! You get in first, Jenny."

Katie pushed me forward and I crawled in, tucking my legs up as close as I could. Linda crawled in next and took the other corner. Katie stuck one foot in.

"Hey! Who's down there!"

Katie and Linda screamed in unison and scuffled out of the ancient oven, slamming its door behind them. In the dark cubicle, I wedged myself tighter into the corner and shut my eyes tight until I saw stars. Grandma's heavy feet plodded across the dirt floor in search of us scoundrels. If she just doesn't look too hard . . .

"Ha!" The door screeched open and she grabbed my arm and hauled me out, dangling from her grip. Her eyes widened up as she examined her find, breathing loudly through her nose. Grey strands of hair had come undone from her bun and hung over her angry eyes. Her lips frowned over pink gums and the saliva sat in her mouth.

I smeared the tears that flowed down my face with a sooty hand and wiped my nose on my arm. I stared down at the dirt floor in shame and saw the heel marks from my cousins, gone now.

"Bad girl!" she spat at me, her face next to mine as she bent over to glare into my eyes.

I whimpered as she pulled me up the creaking steps by my elbow. It hurt; she pulled again. Some clods of dirt fell off the soles of my patents and rolled back down the steps. I wiped my dirty fingers on the hem of my dress and cleaned the dusty tears with its sash.

At the top of the stairs she slammed the door shut behind us and turned to scold me. She bent over and looked into my wet eyes, shaking her head back and forth, her jowls wagging, gurgling some scolding.

I ran through the living room and upstairs to the bedroom, losing clods of dirt on the steps. She waddled behind me, spitting out more accusations.

“Bad girl! Bad girl! Bad girl!”

The snow rushed past our car, large blobs of white cotton heading towards the ground at a sharp angle. The road underneath sounded slushy as the wheels sloshed through the grey and black mush. Dad switched on the windshield wipers, which pulled and pushed the melting snow back and forth over the glass.

“Be there soon.” Dad’s voice contained a hint of relief. He sat up closer to the window, driving more carefully, his eyes darting to keep watch over the traffic around him.

I found my pillow on the floor under some magazines. Slumping down in the stiff vinyl, I curled up and tried to sleep for the remainder of the trip. I closed my eyes and thought of football games, school dances, the prom . . .

“I think she’s asleep,” Mom whispered. I wasn’t.

“Well, I can’t understand that girl’s attitude,” Dad hissed.

“She’s probably not too anxious about being with her parents, Walt, that’s all. She’s at that difficult age.”

“She’s just so silent . . . so moody!”

I stirred a little under the blanket to make them nervous, then resumed my pretend-sleep, smiling underneath the covers at their attempted secrecy.

“How do you think Grandpa is holding up?” The subject changed.

“I don’t know . . . he’ll miss Grandma, for sure.”

I heard Dad cough a little, then reach for his handkerchief in his back pocket. Not finding it, he asked Mom for a tissue. A long nasal blast interrupted the swooshing of the windshield wipers.

“Sorry, Walt. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

"It's just hard to believe. Makes me think of us as kids. Ten kids. God, she was some woman."

"Yes."

"It was tough, but she didn't complain. Even when Grandpa had his fall. She nursed him day and night."

"Yes, Walt."

I nearly suffocated in the pillow, trying hard not to scream. Grandma was not a sweet old cookie-baking lady from television commercials. She was not the cherub-faced type with perfect white dentures. She could barely speak English. She was not like any other grandmother, not at all. I bit the pillow case and clenched it hard between my teeth. No, nothing sweet about *her*. I felt my ears and face redden. I shook off the anger inside me.

One Sunday morning, after church, Grandma removed her white gloves from her knotty fingers and took the net-covered hat from her head. She changed from her yellow church dress to a light blue shift that almost reached her knees, exposing the rolled-down stockings. She tied a red apron around her thick waist and called to Grandpa. He came up from the cellar with his whisky glass and followed her through the kitchen, out the back door.

I slipped into the kitchen behind them and stood on a yellow vinyl-covered chair to look out the window. In the back yard, Grandma kept chickens in a chicken-wire pen behind the vegetable garden. I saw Grandpa enter the coop and chase one of the fat hens around until it was cornered. He dove at it and gripped its neck in his brown skeletal fingers. Satisfied with the catch, he brought the squawking, flailing hen out to Grandma. She checked over its body, poking it and examining its every part. I saw her nod to Grandpa.

The stump of the tree was streaked with faded pink and red stripes down its sides. Grandpa walked to the stump and held the hen's neck over the top, stretching it taut. Grandma clutched a grey steel hatchet that glistened in the morning sun. She smoothed some of the feathers of the hysterical chicken aside and cut its throat all the way through with a single chop.

The yellow-beaked head plopped onto the ground, its eye staring up at the sky. The legs of the hen still lurched sporadically as Grandma picked a few feathers from her hatchet. She took the hen from Grandpa and let its blood drip out, newly staining the stump. Grandma took the hen to the cellar to pluck it, heaving her hefty body down the steps from the yard. Grandpa lit his pipe and walked to his vegetable garden, leaving the chicken's head in a pool of its own blood.

"We're in Sterling now, Jen." Mom looked back at me to announce our arrival and jostle me from my nap.

"Hmm."

The coal town was coming up on the left side of our car. Smoke billowed from houses and factories and steel mills. The air above the buildings was black and sooty, and hung below the grey clouds. The streets wound down the hills and curved in towards the town. Pedestrians carried umbrellas in the streets and hurried from building to building, dodging the sleet and slush.

A massive cinderblock structure came up on the right, belching smoke from several chimneys. It dumped murky water and sewage into the passing river where barges moved up and down the water in search of larger ships. Men in hard hats filed out of the structure, holding dull silver lunch pails. The shrill four o'clock whistle had just blown.

Our Dodge moved across the blackish steel beams of the narrow bridge that arched over the river. Our tires hummed across the smooth surface of its floor. The beams were dotted with holes, like an erector set, as if they could be taken apart and reassembled into another kind of structure.

The car windows began to fog up and Dad switched on the defroster. In the receding fog, Mom pointed to the Sterling Memorial Hospital. Grandma died there. Mom didn't say it out loud; we all knew it. Dad shifted in his seat as he waited for the traffic light to turn green. When it did, we left the hospital behind us.

It was not long ago when we visited Grandma there. As I looked through the rear window, I saw the hospital shrink until it was hidden behind some tree branches. It was this last

summer. Uncle Joe called to let us know that Grandma was in Sterling Memorial; she had some kind of tumor.

The long corridors at Sterling Memorial were painted white to match the shiny linoleum. Pictures hung on the walls every twenty or thirty feet; they were bland, open countryside scenes, endeavoring to humanize the barren atmosphere. Couches and chairs lined the walls, beige vinyl with chrome legs. The nurses moved up and down the corridors, occasionally squeaking their white rubber soles on the antiseptic floors. Nuns in white and blue fingered their rosaries while visiting the patients; they floated from room to room, seemingly moving without feet.

Room 107 was a duplicate of all the rest, except Grandma was in the bed instead of some unfamiliar shriveled face, shrouded in pain or loneliness. She was asleep, and we crept in, seeing her deeply-creased face very pale and distressed. I saw the tubes gurgling into her heavy arm, and one extending up into her nostril. The purplish veins of her arms were exposed under the thin layer of skin draped over her fat and muscle. Several veins looked as if they had collapsed; others were bulging and blue from being tapped recently.

Grandma's grey hair had been taken down from her bun and laid to the side of her head on the pillow. I was surprised to see how long and thin her hair was. It curved around her head and lay partially across her neck, which folded up to meet her chin.

We took a seat and watched her as she lay so still, her chest moving up and down slowly, shallow. The gurgling continued with her breaths, feeding her limp body. Dad looked at Grandma, his eyes softening at the sight of the medical wonders that made her press on with life. Mom fidgeted and played with her purse handle. She never looked at the tubes and wires; instead, she watched Dad slump down further into his seat.

Grandma opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, blinking, trying to recall where she was. Slowly, she turned her head and spotted us sitting in her room, watching her. Her eyes registered each of us in turn, until she met Dad; then they melted and trickled onto her pillow.

Dad stood up and walked over to Grandma's bed. His shoes clicked on the white linoleum. He held onto her hand and they talked in whispers to each other for a short time. He kissed Grandma's pale lips. Patting her hand, he turned to us, head down.

"Grandma's tired. We'd better go. Say good-bye." He moved to the doorway and leaned on the door jamb, staring into space.

Mom went over to Grandma, smiled and said some encouraging words, then placed a soft and quick kiss on Grandma's pale cheek. Carefully avoiding contact with any of the tubes, she patted Grandma's arm.

"Tell your grandmother good-bye, Jenny." She swallowed hard.

I moved to the bed and looked down at the pale wrinkled face that had lost its fight. Her small eyes squinted up into slits and she smiled up at me, her empty gums showing beneath her whitish lips.

She reached for my hand that rested on the chrome bars of her bed. I let her enclose my small hand with her rough, dry palm and squeeze it. She looked into my eyes and whispered some endearments in her native tongue, squeezing my hand harder.

"Yes, Grandma, I love you too," came the stiff, cold reply to her words. It would have to do, I reasoned; I could not understand what she said anyhow.

I kissed her cheek, being polite, and loosened myself from her grasp. I smiled a good-bye and left the room. Mom and Dad followed me down to the stairway. They discussed Grandma's condition and how long it would be before. . . .

In the coffee shop, Dad blew his nose again and rubbed at the corners of his eyes. He attempted to be at ease, shaking off the crispness of death that pervaded the hospital. He joked some and offered to buy us lunch. Mom pulled out a handful of tissues from her purse and dabbed at her eyes. She couldn't seem to stop the constant dripping of tears. Dad scooted a chair near hers and put his arm around her shoulder, squeezing it gently.

I stood at the magazine rack and flipped through some popular teen publications, not looking at any of the pages.

"She's dying and I don't care, she's dying and I don't care . . ." I repeated the chorus in my head over again. "We've all got to go sometime. No great loss anyhow."

I tossed the magazine back on the rack and decided on a hamburger and fries for lunch.

The massive white house loomed before us as our Dodge edged up Murray Street. The lawn was covered with numerous cars that had come into town for the funeral. We pulled up alongside the curb and climbed out into the blustery day.

Grandma's store was closed and on the door hung a handwritten sign telling customers that the owner had died. Dad carried our sparse luggage into the house and called a hello to anyone that might be there. No one answered. He picked up a note from the kitchen table and read it.

"Looks like they've gone on to the funeral home already. Miller and Sons on Birch Street. Must have walked. It's only a couple of blocks from here."

Dad carried the bags up the steps to the bedroom, searching for an empty room.

"Helen, looks like we'll have to take my old bedroom. All the others are filled. Jenny, I'll set a cot up for you in here, too."

His words echoed off the grimy beige walls of the stairway to where Mom and I sat in the living room. There was nothing to do, as usual.

"Jen, honey, can't you tell me what's the matter? You haven't said a civil word all day. . . . Jen? Where are you . . ."

I hopped out of the cushy armchair, bolted up the stairs and ran into Dad's old room. He was still there, sitting on the bed, shoulders slumped. He stared across the room at a yellowed photograph in a silver ornate frame that sat on the doily-covered bureau. Dad was second from the right in the photo, one of seven boys. His three sisters were on the left. In the middle stood Grandma and Grandpa, flanked by their fine, sturdy-looking family.

I must have startled his day-dreams when I rushed into the room. He blew his nose and turned to me with a glassy look.

"Yes, Jen?"

"I . . . I . . . just wanted to . . . change."

"Okay. I'll leave you alone for a while. I'll take the bathroom." He moved over the handmade rug to the door.

"Dad?" I didn't look into his face. "You miss Grandma, don't you."

"Very much . . . why?"

"Well, we didn't live near her . . . and didn't you . . . get *used* to her being . . . far away?"

"It's kind of sad that we couldn't have visited Grandma more often. I realize it now. But it's too late." He stared at the photo.

"But . . . didn't you kind of . . . *not* miss her? Wasn't she kind of . . . mean?"

Dad walked over to me and looked down into my face with his moist brown eyes. I saw the red veins run from the irises to the corners. He cupped my chin in his right palm and smiled a sad, knowing smile.

"Jenny, you really don't know what life was like then." He nodded toward the photograph on the bureau. "We're all smiling there, but it doesn't tell you how miserable life was."

"But, Dad . . ."

"Jenny . . . she was a tough woman because she had to be. She *had* to be strict in order to manage this big household and take care of Grandpa. After that fall, he never was the same."

"But . . ."

"Grandma took in the neighbors' laundry and ran that old store of hers. She wouldn't take any charity, either. You're confusing her being proud and strict, with 'mean.' "

Dad let his fingers drop from my chin. He walked over to the door.

"So please, don't call her 'mean.' You don't know what you're saying."

Miller and Sons Funeral Home was a small white frame building with black shutters attached to each window. The building was set off from Birch Street, embedded in a neatly manicured area of evergreens and white birches. The black Cadillac was parked beside the building and was turned

toward the street, anxious to leave.

In the hallway, worn red carpet led the way to the viewing rooms. A rich walnut paneling began at the floor and stopped at waist level. It looked as if it was recently polished, and its deep tones accented the red-flocked wallpaper that also decorated the walls.

The air was heavy with roses and carnations, and it stifled me as we entered the hallway. The mourners were clustered in little bunches ahead of us, in the main room. Dad removed his hat and Mom shook the snow off of her hair. I stamped the crunchy snow from the bottom of my boots. We moved forward into the main parlor, into the hum of consoling words and sobbing.

"Walt! So glad to see you . . ."

Uncle Joe embraced Dad in a hug. It was strange to see the two grown men console each other in this way, whispering through tears. I left them and went to a quiet corner of the parlor to sit in the shadows.

Katie and Linda had changed; they had grown to be pretty college girls. They nodded a hello to me, a kind of grave salutation, fitting for the occasion. We hadn't seen each other for some years.

"Isn't this terrible? I can't believe Grandma's gone," sighed Katie.

"Remember all those fun times we had together at her house during summer vacations? I'm gonna miss her." Linda must have forgotten about the oven.

"Do you know which room she's in?" I asked them. I couldn't commiserate with them; we had nothing in common anymore.

"Who . . . Grandma? She's laid out in the anteroom, over there," Katie answered through her tissues.

I left them sitting in the shadows and went to make my dutiful appearance in the anteroom. I hoped that this would go quickly and that I could escape the flowery, stagnant rooms.

The oak doorway framed the view into the room in which Grandma lay. I saw rows of metal folding chairs lined up neatly, dotted with a few of the relatives. The walls were pastel yellow, but the red votive candles threw an orangish haze up

the walls, like streams of soft fire climbing to the ceiling. The candles flickered unevenly as the breeze of people moving, breathing and sobbing nipped at their flames. Green velvet sofas lined the walls and were crowded with weeping women in black dresses and hats.

Grandpa sat in the front row of folding chairs in a kind of daze, facing the casket in front of him. Dad and Mom stood at the casket for a moment, then knelt and prayed with their heads bent low. After a few minutes, Dad raised his head and reached out and touched Grandma's hand.

When everyone had moved away from the casket, I ventured in slowly, avoiding the familiar faces, to take a last look at her.

The family had picked out a massive grey metal casket. The corners each had a copy of the Pieta sculptured into the metal. I could see the sorrowful expression on the mother's face as she looked down at her dead son. The sentiment was so much like that of the funeral parlor.

As I moved closer, shuffling along the red worn carpet, I saw the red and white roses which lay over the top of the casket. The spray was covered with a white satin ribbon that had gold-lettered words on it: Our Mother.

I saw the white satin-cushioned interior of the casket as I drew closer. I stopped for a moment; there were her hands, lying one on top of the other. The veins that once covered the tops of her hands were no longer bulging or puffy; they had receded back into the white skin.

The room seemed silent, as if Grandma and I were the only two there. I felt as if she was waiting for me to look, but I held back.

"I'm not ready to see you, Grandma, not like this. I can't feel sorry for you."

Something pulled at me; I needed to look at her. A few steps then.

"Please, I'm not ready."

I saw that she was dressed in her yellow church outfit and a string of pearls lay on her chest. A white rosary was spread beneath her quiet hands. I could not look into her face. I didn't want to look. Not yet.

My eyes edged their vision toward her face in small

moves. Her chin was quiet and soft, so very still. Her mouth was silent, not tense; her lips pink and smooth. Her cheeks were a soft peach color, like the blush that comes from a warm day. Her eyes were shut, rested, and her tiny lashes cast a light shadow on her cheek. The wrinkles of her forehead were still there, but less deep than before. The thin strands of long grey hair that once tumbled out of her bun were now caught up in a soft knot at the back of her head.

I found myself holding onto the side of her casket, looking down at her. I let myself kneel on the red velvet cushion in front of me.

"You don't look the same, Grandma."

My right hand moved from its clasp and came up to touch her hand. Her skin was smooth and cool under my fingers.

I remembered that last visit at the hospital, months before. She'd held onto my hand and said good-bye. She knew it would be the last time she saw me. I knew it too.

"I'm sorry, Grandma." I whispered the words out loud but the sleeping woman couldn't respond.

A tear clouded my vision as I looked down; her face and hands melted and smeared in my watery sight. I felt a steady trickle of drops lightly glance my cheek and dip towards my chin, where they fell to the red carpet.

"You'll never know it now. It's too late. Oh, God, if only I hadn't . . ."

The hateful thoughts that I had saved over the years tumbled into my consciousness. I saw the incidents, one by one, painfully flashing in my mind.

But it was too late to tell her now. I rose from the velvet cushion where my knees had left marks in the nap of the fabric. I turned to look for . . .

My boots made soft shuffling sounds along the worn carpet as I hurried to where he sat, alone, on a folding chair in a corner.

"Dad."

He picked up his head, out of his open palms. "Yes, Jen?"

"I love you."

His red-rimmed eyes searched mine, questioning this sudden outburst. I could only smile. Maybe it wasn't too late.